

090415 Ambassador Speckhard Interview for ET-3 Anihneuseis
Transcript

Journalist: Mr. Ambassador, thank you for accepting this interview.

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: You are very welcome.

Journalist: And you are welcome to Thessaloniki. It's been a long time since you last were here. What was the purpose of this trip?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Well, I wanted very much to come up here once again. First off, I had not been to the Farm School yet and it is such an incredible institution with such a long history that I've heard so much about. I wanted to see it firsthand to understand the great work that they are doing there and training young people not just from Greece but from all over the Balkans and the international community in agricultural sciences. So that was a great meeting. I also had a lunch with experts and businessmen and journalists working on environmental technologies and renewable energy, which is, as you know, a new priority for President Obama's administration.

Journalist: As well as the Minister?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: This morning I started with meeting the new Minister of Macedonia and Thrace. We had a great discussion on his vision for this region as a gateway to the Balkans and the wider international community and his view on how development can take place. I have been a big promoter, as well as our consulate here, of developing trade, ties and business ties between the United States and Greece and in seeing Greece as a focal point for broader regional development in this area.

Journalist: Mr. Ambassador, during the 60th annual meeting of the NATO leaders, we were given the impression that America wants to change the priorities of the alliance. Turkey asked and took the second role in NATO. Why is President Obama being so generous with Turkey?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: I do not think we see it that way. We see it a little bit differently. When the new administration came in, it has looked at the world perhaps a little bit differently than in the past and has focused on the importance of setting a new tone in the international engagement of reaching out, to particularly the Muslim World, to ensure that we are working together on common problems and challenges and promoting a vision of peace and stability in the world. As you know-- Greece knows better than anybody-- the Middle East is a very important region for stability in the world, as well as for your own region. And Turkey, with neighbors such as Iran, Iraq and Syria, has an important role as an example of a modern, secular Islamic state and we want to help Ankara I think. Not only in NATO, but in the international community.

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Journalist: You are calling this role important. Many people think it is upgraded and I think it has created tension with most important allies of NATO, especially Germany and France. Do you think that we will have two opposing poles in NATO?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: No, I do not think upgrading is the right perception there. I think the challenge has been, what has been a very important factor, is the European perspective for Turkey and that has been an important role in helping create a vision for the future. I think the United States feels strongly that the European perspective be maintained as an important incentive for Turkey as well as for all of us in terms of how we see the future. So I think that is where the United States is putting its emphasis in relation to the importance of Turkey. So I do not see, in that sense, a difference. I also see the new administration looking at it differently in the sense that the old traditional ways of looking at Europe and the world no longer apply in today's modern world. So this notion of looking at Greece and Turkey, for instance, as a package is a little bit outdated so the new administration is looking at each of these countries independently, rightfully important on their own as strong partners and allies but not in terms of the old sense that it has to be that whatever you do for one you have to do exactly the same for the other. We need to develop these relationships equally and importantly but they can be different.

Journalist: Mr. Ambassador, you know very well the situation in Iraq. Do you believe that the country will remain unified, or do you see possibly the creation of three new independent states?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: I believe, after having worked there for two years, that the future of Iraq is a unified country. It is actually a country that has had a long tradition of interethnic as well as intra-religious diversity. They have lived together for centuries that way and if you take out the spoilers, those who try to disrupt the political system and the progress through violence and terror, Iraqis themselves get along very well together. They work very well together, they have intermarried for long periods and they have a mutual respect and appreciation. So I am actually confident that is the future of the country. There are other economic factors as well that drive the country together, that make it-- as a unified country-- a very economically attractive future power in the Middle East that you lose when you have people contemplating the notion that there would be anything but a unified Iraq. So I am very optimistic that that country will remain unified and has actually a bright future given its natural resource base and its intellectual capital.

Journalist: I would like to stay in what you said about the relationship between Turkey, Greece and the United States. You said that things are changing and maybe we should see the whole thing in a different way. But still Greek people were annoyed from the visit; they think that in a

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way the balance of the powers in the region has overturned. Some people think that the U.S. is ignoring the Greek interests in the region.... What is your opinion?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: I really do not feel that this is fair, because I obviously have been working very closely on the U.S.-Greek relations in the first months of this new administration. From what I have seen, your Foreign Minister was one of the first who came to Washington and met with Secretary Clinton. I was just back in Washington two weeks ago to celebrate Independence Day in the East Room of the White House, which had a ceremony with the President and the Vice-President, as well as the Archbishop of the American Diocese of the Orthodox Church and the Minister of Justice. Well, the President gave a very passionate and personal, I think, speech about his interest in Greece and the important role that Greece has played in the development of the United States as well as what the United States has done for Greece over the years. The Vice President then spoke as well. They stayed on for the reception to greet and meet people. This was a significant event in terms of Greek-U.S. relations and so, in my mind, there is a lot of attention and focus being given to this. The President met with Prime Minister Karamanlis, one of the few leaders that he actually had a bilateral meeting with, in Strasburg. So the focus has been very significant by the new administration, it has only been in office for a few months, in terms of the attention and focus they have been giving to Greece. Now of course the President traveled to Turkey and did not travel here, but I think traveling and visiting capitals is not the only way you show your interest and you strengthen a relationship and I am confident that you are going to see this new administration put energy and effort into strengthening this partnership. To me, that has become obvious in just the first few months.

Journalist: Mr. Ambassador, all analysts, also Americans, agree that there is an overturn of the balance of power in the region with this so-called upgraded role of Turkey after the visit of President Obama. Are you confident that this overbalance will affect positively the American interests in the region?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: I do not see this is an issue of balance of power. I think it is important for people to think, as the new administration does, about the modern world and not fall back into old patterns and habits. Turkey, Greece, the United States, are all partners and allies and we need to think of ourselves that way. The threats of today's world are much different than they were twenty, thirty, fifty, a hundred years ago. The threats we are facing primarily come from transnational problems, from terrorism, and you see that in your own country. You see it internationally, from economic challenges and crises, from transnational crime, from illegal migration flows, from narcotics trafficking, from piracy that affects our trade and flows there and I really think that it is important for people to be thinking about where the future is and where the challenges in that future are. That does not mean that there still aren't issues in the Greece-Turkey relationship. But as two NATO allies, those have been managed

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and have been managed effectively over the course of the history of sixty years of the alliance. I think we will be able as partners and allies to continue to manage those. So in my mind, this notion of balance as the key or cornerstone question is no longer as relevant as it was in the past. And I think it will be very beneficial for the United States and Greece to remove ourselves from that question as if we were a trilateral engagement and instead be focusing on Greece and the United States as an important relationship in its own right. There is a huge amount that our two countries can benefit from cooperation and that is where I think we should be focusing our energy and attention and we should be doing it independently, without reference to Greece's relationship with Turkey and what you are doing there or our relationship with Turkey. Those should all be mutually reinforcing, which I think they can be. My view is the President's trip to Turkey was a very positive thing for Greece. The best thing for Greece is that your large neighbor is stable, engaged with the United States and the European Union, is moderate and remains so; a secular example for the Muslim world. So, in my mind, that is good for Greece and it is one of the best things we can do for your security and your stability-- to pay some attention on that issue.

Journalist: Yes, but I will add something for our neighbor. Without creating problems in the Aegean, or in Cyprus etc.?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: Well, I think our hope is that those problems will be resolved over time. You had a period in the past where you started making more progress on those issues. I think the reality is the situation has improved over the course of time. Maybe not from month to month if you look at it that way, but over year to year I think things are getting better in that context. And those are issues that still have to be worked on. Those are ones that are manageable, that the government of Greece and the government of Turkey have found ways to work together on, that they need to continue to focus on, and they need to have a common, and I think they do have a common goal, which is to remove those irritants to your relationship with your important neighbor in the future.

Journalist: Another issue that concerns Turkey is the Kurdish problem, not only Turkey of course, in the region. The Kurds are asking for help from the United States to create their own State. Do you think this is possible and would it be good for the interests of the United States in the region?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: We have excellent relations with Turkey and as an ethnic group the Kurdish people have very warm relations with the American people. That is separate and distinct from the issue of future separatist issues or those kinds of things. The United States supports the integrity, the territorial integrity of Turkey, as we do Iraq, and that is not an issue in U.S. policy.

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Journalist: Just a last question that is also connected with the visit of Mr. Obama in Turkey. The meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch was not given that much publicity and why?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: I think that too much is being read into that in the press. That is not unusual for Presidential visits to foreign countries, to have for the efficiency of time and of meetings, to have a pool or an official photographer to take the photos and then distribute the photos. There are time lags and differences involved in terms of how fast these photos are distributed but I think people should not read in anything in terms of policy sense. The President made a very important signal in meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch, about our long-standing policy of support for the Patriarch as the leader, Ecumenical leader of millions of orthodox believers. Not just in Greece but around the world, including millions in the United States and its support for religious freedom and the importance of the role of the Ecumenical Patriarch as the ecumenical leader of those groups of believers.

Journalist: A few words, Mr. Ambassador, it is the last question. What has changed in the triangle of Washington, Athens, and Ankara after the upgraded role of Turkey and the visit of Mr. Obama in Turkey?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: What I believe has happened is that we have moved to a more positive mechanism of dealing with its relationship independently and not having to be burdened with the linkages among all three. Today what you are going to see, and tomorrow, is that focus on strengthening the partnership with Greece is on its own benefit and it is on its own importance to both Greece and the United States and that would be good for us. That Greece's relationship to the United States is not a derivative or bi-product of our relationship with Turkey and vice versa, but instead it is an important valued relationship where the new administration, as it has said, it has a new approach and a new tone and it listens. It engages in dialogues and it works together cooperatively. We are going to do that with Greece independently of what we are doing with Turkey and that is a good thing.

Journalist: The Greek-American relations are at a good level?

AMBASSADOR SPECKHARD: I believe they are in a good level and they are advancing rapidly and I am very optimistic and positive about the future direction of this relationship.

Journalist: Thank you Mr. Ambassador.